

## Elephants show compassion in face of death

By Roger Highfield

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An elephant struggles to help another who lies dying from the effects of a snake bite.



These astonishing pictures reveal the depth of compassion the creatures feel for each other in their moments of need.

Film footage shot by scientists at the Samburu National Reserve in Kenya caught Eleanor as she fell to the ground after being bitten.

Her helper, Grace, was seen calling out in distress and making desperate attempts to get the stricken elephant on to her feet.

But the 40-year-old matriarch was too ill to respond and her efforts were ultimately unsuccessful. Her great weight compressed her internal organs and by the following morning she was dead.

That day her body was visited by other elephants who rocked back and forth or stood silently nearby.

It was a dramatic demonstration that elephants, like humans, show compassion after a death of one of their own species, care about other elephants in distress and have a strong interest in the dead - and not only for their immediate kin.

Grace is the matriarch of a separate family, christened the Virtues by scientists, to that of Eleanor, who headed the First Ladies. But Grace still came to the dying elephant's aid.



**Grace pays her last respects to the body of Eleanor**

The research team from Oxford University's Department of Zoology, the charity Save the Elephants, and the University of California report the rare observations in a forthcoming study to be published in the journal *Applied Animal Behaviour Science*.

Movements of 50 animals are constantly tracked, allowing the team to measure and record visits to the dead matriarch.

From radio tracking and direct or recorded observations, the study showed that five families visited the dead Eleanor, showing a distinct interest in her body.

One of these families was her own, but the researchers noted that Eleanor also received visits from unrelated elephants who were not normally associated with her.

The study concludes that elephants are interested in sick, dying or dead elephants, irrespective of a genetic relationship. The authors conclude: "It is an example of how elephants and humans may share emotions, such as compassion, and have an awareness and interest about death."

Most animals, unlike humans, appear to show little interest in the dead of their own species, although some - such as chimpanzees, dolphins and elephants - have been described as being concerned about ailing or dead members of their species. Lead author Dr Iain Douglas-Hamilton, from the Oxford Zoology Department and founder of Save the Elephants, said: "This behaviour in an animal species can be compared to human behaviour and indicates that such feelings as compassion may not be restricted to our species alone."

But the study showed that there are limits to elephant compassion. Eleanor's six-month-old female calf nuzzled her mother's carcass then walked around appearing confused, trying to suckle from other young calves before returning to her mother.

The young calf did not survive long because none of the breeding females who normally associated with Eleanor would adopt and suckle her.

Prof Fritz Vollrath, from Oxford's Department of Zoology, said: "These fortuitous and fascinating insights into elephant life were possible only because of the detailed, long-term monitoring of this important Northern Kenyan elephant population."

■ Leader: Lore of the jungle

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